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ABSTRACT

Stories consume lives and lives become stories. A unit of study examines the creation of self in autobiographies and biographies looking closely at how we construct a life from the fragments of human experience and memory. This paper looks briefly at the different theoretical perspectives about biography and autobiography, following closely the ideas presented in David McCooey's "Artful Lives," and then show how these perspectives can be taught in the classroom through a series of exercises. The unit uses a variety of genres and modes to explore the way the self is constructed, including film, eulogy, reviews, and obituaries as well as the autobiographies and biographies. Suggestions for suitable teaching texts are offered. (Author/RS)

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ED 456 461

TEACHING BIOGRAPHY IN THE SENIOR ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Stories consume lives and lives become stories.

This unit will examine the creation of self in autobiographies and biographies looking closely at how we construct a life from the fragments of human experience and memory. The workshop will look briefly at the different theoretical perspectives about biography and autobiography, following closely the ideas presented in David McCooey's *Artful Lives*, and then show how these perspectives can be taught in the classroom through a series of exercises. The unit uses a variety of genres and modes to explore the way the self is constructed, including film, eulogy, reviews and obituaries as well as the autobiographies and biographies. Suggestions for suitable teaching texts will be offered.

WORKSHOP

The following text is part of the introduction to the unit and has been written for students. It locates the main issues to be discussed in the workshop.

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Autobiography has become a problematic genre in modern literary theory. In an autobiography individuals try to integrate the various parts of their lives and create a meaningful whole in chronological order showing the development of an aspect of the person. Roland Barthes, one of the first post-structuralists, rejected this idea of placing autobiography into an "*alphabetical order*' because he believed that the end result was "*a single enormous network which would be the structure of a book* " and wasn't real. In the 1960s the philosopher Louis Mink commented on this desire to create some sense of a developing life in autobiographies: "*Stories are not lived but told.*" he wrote, "*Life has no beginnings, middles or ends... Narrative qualities are transferred from art to life.*"

Autobiography and biography therefore becomes a fiction because of the insistence on applying the structure and purpose of writing or narration to the series of fragmented experiences which make up life. The mundane everyday business of living is subsumed as every encounter, every experience becomes a step on the ladder that leads to greatness. The desire to create a good story with a sense of narrative, without the dullness, and using metaphor alters the way the real is presented. Patrick White seemed to confirm this view when he wrote about the writing of his autobiography *Flaws in the Glass*, saying that: *As one goes along one wonders: is the novelist in me taking over? Shall I perhaps overdo the flaws in my anxiety to portray the real person?* (in Mc Cooey, p.171)

Until the concepts of poststructuralism began to affect the way people wrote autobiography, traditional autobiographies sought to present a "unified self", "an absolute self' with a beginning, a middle and an end and yet real life lacks the sense of finish of a

narrative structure. For the traditional biographer and autobiographer, life is divided into neat compartments of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, trying constantly to impose a sense of order to a haphazard existence. The Danish existentialist, Kirkegaard reassuringly asserted that "*the unification of different stages of life... is the task set for human beings.*'(in Whitlock). Even after death the same process of review continues as lives are revisited and stories retold, altered with each telling in obituaries, eulogies and elegies, themselves forms of biography.

The attempt to make sense of a life was the focus of Orson Welle's film, Citizen Kane. The film opens with an obituary newsreel about a famous man Charles Foster Kane who has just died. An unsatisfied director cuts short the newsreel with an appeal to his journalists to produce something different. "*It's not enough to show us what a man does, you need to show us who he is*", he says. The film follows the attempts of a journalist to find out what it was that made this man's life significant. In the process he uncovers contradictory evidence from different witnesses and fails to find out to what Kane's dying words alluded. This film reveals many of the problems of biography. It shows the difficulty of relying on one person's view and the impossibility of knowing what really motivated a person. Autobiography is no less problematic - even the author of her/his own life can find the past confusing and contradictory.

The phenomenologist, Dilthy, commented on the task of creating an autobiography as being the site of where "*the self comprehends its own life*" and "*our past is evoked to make sense of a new relationship between the present, past and future.*" In so doing, what we produce is altered by time and by a desire to protect others. The Australian novelist Martin Boyd was influenced by this desire and chose to construct

novels rather than an autobiography though the autobiographical elements are clearly present. He wrote that "*I have deliberately created this confusion, to avoid libelling the innocent.*"(in Mc Cooey, p. 179).

Many autobiographers write their own story or choose their preferred biographer to ensure that their version of the story becomes the accepted one. It was for this reason that Les Murray, famous Australian poet, authorised Peter Alexander, to write his life story and also took the publishers to court when they attempted to use material from another source. This determination to control one's life story was taken to its extreme by George Bernard Shaw who also arrogantly proceeded to review the biography of himself on which he had collaborated with G.K. Chesterton.(Mead ,1999)

Biographies and autobiographies give us an insight into the lives of people, famous and ordinary. The text places that person in their times and gives us a sense of cultural, social and historical difference. Our curiosity is aroused to explore the worlds of those who are different from us. A mystery thriller becomes more powerful when it is founded in the real, when it can be shown that "truth is stranger than fiction". The recent interest in the biography of the murderer, Mayne, who bequeathed money to the University of Queensland is an example of such a mystery uncovered in the book *The Mayne Inheritance.* The public rushed to buy the book *Sleepers* which claimed to be an autobiography about the shocking brutality inflicted on youth who were sent to a reform school. The subsequent court case against the writer showed that the truth of the book was not able to be proven. We need to ask ourselves why an author would misrepresent a text as real? The answer possibly lies in the fact that "real stories" sell. People want to believe in the truth of a text. They are becoming more and more cunning about the

manipulation imposed by the media and search for truth in the real life stories. They want to believe that autobiographies and biographies are concerned with truth and authenticity.

Some autobiographies state clearly their intention, some do not. Even those which state their intention need to be interrogated to determine how real that intention is. If the desire is to tell the "real story" then for whom is this story real? Was Anna Woods the girl her parents shared with the world in Anna's Story? Why would her parents be so concerned to make a statement to the nation about their daughter after her death from Ecstacy became public?

There are countless reasons for the writing of autobiographies and biographies. Many autobiographies are a reaction to a moment of crisis such as a death (*Paula*). Some are written for a political purpose and seek to examine national identity or race through an exploration for personal identity (*My Place and The Color of Water*). Others are composed in an attempt to try to understand the past and different times (*A Fortunate Life and Wild Swans*). Some are written in an attempt to make sense of a life and to show growth (*An Angel at My Table*). Autobiographies may be written to share a culture different from "the normal" (*Not Without My Daughter*). They may be written to give another side to a story (*Jacquie and Me*) or as a reaction to a previous autobiography which it was felt created a "false" truth (*Out of Tune in reaction to Shine*). It may be because new evidence has been discovered or released (*The Assassination of Marilyn Monroe*)

Whatever the justification, biographers and autobiographers keep producing their truth and the public keeps buying it, interested because of an experience in their own lives or because of a curiosity about how other people live. The "real" feeds the desire in

each of us to imagine and thus the "real" becomes the "imagined". It becomes yet another story in the larger story of life, a life with more narrative qualities than the real life stories of the countless millions of people who devour the realities of others as they emerge in millions of paperback copies.

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